

# Davidson's Test

Donald Davidson's Critique of the Turing Test as an Expression of  
his Philosophy about Linguistic Competence

Tobias Lohse

## Abstract

In his essay 'Turing's Test' ([1990b] 2004), Donald Davidson

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Historical Context . . . . .	2
1.2	Donald Davidson . . . . .	2
1.3	The Turing Test . . . . .	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Davidson's Discussion of the Turing Test</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Relevance of Turing's Test . . . . .	3
2.2	Davidson's Critique of Turing's Test . . . . .	4
2.3	Davidson's Proposal for a Modified Test . . . . .	4
2.4	The Distinction between Explanations of Practical Interpretation and an Essential Theory of Interpretation . . . . .	4
<b>3</b>	<b>Necessary Conditions of Understanding</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1	The Triangular Nature of Knowledge . . . . .	5
3.2	Social aspect of Language . . . . .	6
3.3	Anti-Conventionalism . . . . .	6

<b>4</b>	<b>Davidson's Theory of Interpretation</b>	<b>7</b>
4.1	The Underlying Ontology and Epistemology . . . . .	7
4.2	Davidson's Program . . . . .	8
4.3	Radical Interpretation . . . . .	8
4.4	Unified Theory of Thought and Meaning . . . . .	9
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>9</b>
5.1	Critique of Davidson's Theory . . . . .	9

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Historical Context

History of Davidson's Philosophy

- Vienna Circle and Empiricism
- Wittgenstein and the social aspect of language
- Quine and the new non-empiricist analytical philosophy

Introduction to theories of meaning

- semantic vs. foundational theories of meaning
- brief overview of players

## 1.2 Donald Davidson

Introduction to Davidson

- Basic positioning in history and schools
- Main areas of work
- Clarification of Focus of the thesis
- Hint at Donald's interesting Life

## 1.3 The Turing Test

Description of Turing Test

- Background to Tourings' paper

- relevance of the test, other tests
- Davidson and other versions of the test
- The state of AI

(Turing 1950)

## 2 Davidson's Discussion of the Turing Test

### 2.1 Relevance of Turing's Test

Why the test is interesting to Davidson

- Test is concerned with the nature of thought
- Pragmatic approach to the question of thought
- Empiric criterion for thought
- Not confined to machines

“the test is designed to throw light on the nature of thought.” (Davidson [1990b] 2004, 78)

Where does Davidson agree

- There should be an empiric test for intellect
- Linguistic competence is essential for intellect

Turing's proposed test shows that he agrees with Davidson on the fact that linguistic competence is essential to intellect. And I think we also have to interpret Davidson and Turing as agreeing that there is a scientific approach that can describe essential parts of our linguistic competence. In the case of Turing this is evident in his belief that there is a program that allows the computer to win the imitation game. For Davidson it is evident in his proposal of the empiric Unified Theory that can capture the essence of linguistic competence and rationality. We will investigate Davidson's ideas further in [Unified Theory of Understanding].

- General/Strong AI might well be possible

See also ‘Representation and Interpretation’ (Davidson [1990a] 2004)

- Davidson sees no argument why AI shouldn't be possible
- AI through Brain simulation should be possible
- No need for introspection into working of mind
- against Searle's Chinese room?

## 2.2 Davidson's Critique of Turing's Test

Rejection of sharp distinction between mental and physical abilities (E4.5)

- There is no sharp distinction between physical (especially sensory) and mental abilities
- Connected to rejection of Cartesian Epistemology

distinction between semantic and syntactic abilities (+E5.8)

## 2.3 Davidson's Proposal for a Modified Test

History of interaction with the world (E4.5)

- The ability to determine non predefined meaning is essential for intelligence

## 2.4 The Distinction between Explanations of Practical Interpretation and an Essential Theory of Interpretation

distinction between sufficient and necessary conditions of linguistic competence (E4.8, E5.8)

- relation to term linguistic competence and linguistic performance

I use the term *linguistic competence*<sup>1</sup> here to refer to Davidson's idea of the essential aspect of understanding language vs. the practical understanding of language.

truth conditions as a formal language

Unified Theory, Radical Interpretation

Successful Communication & Anti-Conventionalism & Holism of knowledge

---

<sup>1</sup>The term linguistic competence was introduced by Chomsky who makes a "fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situation)" (Chomsky 2014, 4). While Davidson criticizes the idea of linguistic competence as knowledge of a language, he adopts the term for the description of his theory that describes the interpreters essential competence in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' (1986).

## 3 Necessary Conditions of Understanding

### 3.1 The Triangular Nature of Knowledge

Distinctiveness of three types of Knowledge (subjective, intersubjective, objective) (E3.14)

Three Questions of Epistemology (E3.14)

- how to know other minds
- how to know world
- how to know own mind without evidence

Rejection of skepticism (E3.14, SEP Davidson, E4.1)

Rejection of empiricist Epistemology (E3.14, E2.1)

- No primacy of names and predicates in the foreground of senses
- doesn't he contradict that in E2.9 and E4.8?

Rejection of Positivism (reductionism to world knowledge) (E3.14)

Reasons for Irreducibility/anaomalism of Mental to Physical (E3.14, E4.8)

- Irreducibility of knowledge of belief to knowledge of world
- causal nature of the mental (+E1.11, E4.8)
- Missing independent mode of communication about mental theories (+E4.8)

Rejection of Cartesian Etymology (primacy of knowledge of one's own mind) (E3.14, E3.3, E3.13)

Principle of Charity (Coherence and Correspondence) (E3.14, E2.9, E3.14)

Reaction to stimuli (E3.14)

- proximal vs. distal stimuli (E5.4)

Meaning as Language (E3.14, E2.2)

- not things in world
- not entities sui generis

Inscrutability of Reference / Indeterminacy of meaning (Quine Word and Object, E5.3, E2.16, E3.14)

Importance of distinction between true and false beliefs (E5.8, E3.14, E4.1, SEP Davidson)

### 3.2 Social aspect of Language

(E5.8)

relevance of interpretation rather than meaning (+E2.2)

- see similarities to Gadamer's Hermeneutics of Wirkungsgeschichte (Bertram 2012)

Intention in communication (+E5.10)

Interpretation of communication

Truth only determined through communication

- see also Plato, Socrates (E5.16)

No a priori knowledge about language(-learning), only empirical knowledge (E2.1)

Finite number of semantic primitives (E2.1)

Arguments for primacy of ideology over language

- Malapropisms and the like (E5.7)

Wittgenstein's norm of actually getting it right in language

- also see language game analogy in anti conventionalism (2.18)
- and importance of distinction between true and false beliefs in triangulation (E3.14)

### 3.3 Anti-Conventionalism

(E2.18)

arguments against conventionalism

- impossibility of public sign for sincerity

language game analogy (+E5.8)

## 4 Davidson's Theory of Interpretation

What is this theory of interpretation

- Anomalous Monism
- Davidson's Program
- Radical Interpretation
- Triangulation
- Unified theory of Thought, Action, and Meaning
- Prior and Passing Theories
- The social Aspect of language

So what is it that I am referring to when I speak about Davidson's theory of interpretation? While this seems like a straight forward question it is a little more complicated because of the distributed nature of Davidson's work.

Davidson's theory can be traced back to his rejection of meaning and idea that interpretation can be described as a process of 'translating' utterances into truth conditions based on assumptions about the beliefs of the speaker using the principle of Charity, which he develops in 'Truth and Meaning'<sup>2</sup> (Davidson 1967) and 'Radical Interpretation' (Davidson 1973).

### 4.1 The Underlying Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology of only objects and events (E3.14, E5.4)

Directness of knowledge of world

- no intermediary entities (5.3, E5.4, E3.10)
- no mentales, language only through communication, meaning given causally by objects events (E5.9)

Anomalous monism & supervenience of the mental (E1.11, E3.14)

- parallels to Spinoza's causal theory of affects (E5.20)
- see arguments for irreducibility of mental in Triangulation (E3.14)

Rejection of Third Dogma of Empiricism (E2.13)

Semantics as a Method for Metaphysics (E5.3)

---

<sup>2</sup>His idea that truth conditions (T-Sentences) are all that is needed to explain interpretation, and any more fundamental notion of meaning is misconceived, has also led to what is known as Davidson's Program: The attempt to give an account of the interpretation of utterances purely with the means of first order logic.

- if we have semantics right, we know what objects exist
- problems: inscrutability, we only think exist

Truth as elementary non-reducible concept (E5.2, E2.I)

## 4.2 Davidson's Program

(E2.9, E2.2)

Tarski's Convention-T

holistic measure for T-Sentences (E2.9)

Relation between meaning of words and expressions (+2.1)

- only expressions have meaning not words
- How words contribute to meaning is determined comparatively

Method to determine meaning from finite sets of properties of sentences (E2.1)

Truth as relation between sentence, time, speaker (at least) (E2.2)

Truth conditions as meaning

Truth functionality determines whether interpretation is correct

Axioms of truth theories as laws, supporting counterfactual claims (E2.12)

Literal Meaning of metaphors (E2.17)

Principle of Charity

## 4.3 Radical Interpretation

(E2.9)

Dependence of semantic and foundational theories of meaning (SEP Meaning Lewis, E2.18, E3.14, E5.8)

- The rules of interpretation only emerge in communication (adjusting prior to passing theories)

Intersubjective Knowledge (of other minds) (E3.14)

Belief about truth of sentence (E3.14)

Quine's radical Translation

Hierarchy of Radical Interpretation process (E2.9, E4.8)



- always true sentences => logical connectives
- sentences true under observations => non-abstract terms
- ... => all else

convention as pragmatic tool for syntax and grammatical mood determination (E2.18, E5.8)

Prior and passing theory of interpretation (E5.7, E4.8, E2.18)

Principle of Charity

## 4.4 Unified Theory of Thought and Meaning

(E4.8, E4.10)

empirical and holistic character of theory

Probabilistic decision theory

Arguments for psychology as proper scientific theory

Constraint on unified theory

- Perfect logicians
- Purely Rational
- Theoretic
- ignorance of emotion, intention, perception as independent variables

Normativity of theory (+E3.14)

Externalistic theory

Intentionality and Causation (E3.14)

- Causal connection between physical and psychological phenomena (E3.14, E1.1, E1.11)

Paradox of Irrationality (E4.12)

Relation to Behaviorism

## 5 Conclusion

### 5.1 Critique of Davidson's Theory

Bertram's Critique of Davidson's Intentionalism

- Davidson's

(Bertram 2012) (Davidson 1997)

Bertram, Georg W. 2012. "Antwort und Zugang." In *Hermeneutik Und Die Grenzen Der Sprache*, edited by Ulrich Arnsward, Jens Kertscher, and Louise Röska-Hardy. Heidelberg.

Chomsky, Noam. 2014. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. MIT press.

Davidson, Donald. 1967. "Truth and Meaning." *Synthese* 17 (3): 304–323.

Davidson, Donald. 1973. "Radical Interpretation." *Dialectica* 27 (1): 314–328.

Davidson, Donald. 1986. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, edited by Ernest Lepore, 433–446. Blackwell.

Davidson, Donald. 1997. "Gadamer and Plato's Philebus." In *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, edited by L Hahn. Chicago.

Davidson, Donald. (1990a) 2004. "Representation and Interpretation." In *Modelling the Mind*, edited by W H Newton-Smith and K V Wilkes, 13–26. Oxford University Press, Reprint.

Davidson, Donald. (1990b) 2004. "Turing's Test." In *Problems of Rationality: Philosophical Essays Volume 4*. Oxford University Press, Originally published in *Modelling the Mind*, edited by K Said, Oxford University Press: 1990.

Turing, Alan M. 1950. "Computing Machinery and Intelligence." *Mind* 59 (October): 433–460.